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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND: PM PUSHES SECRET DIALOGUE, BUT IT WON'T BUDGE

REF: BANGKOK 2096 (DIALOGUE RESUMES)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

(U) This cable was jointly drafted by ConGen Chiang Mai and Embassy Bangkok.

Summary and Comment

1. (S) The recently renewed secret peace dialogue between the RTG and southern insurgents is - despite strong support from PM Abhisit - making little progress, according to sources involved in the talks. The two biggest confidence-building measures on the table - investigation of the June 8 mosque killings and release of an imprisoned Muslim spiritual leader - are both stalled in the RTG machinery. Moreover, Abhisit and RTA Commander Anupong continue to be at odds over the utility of the dialogue. In the meantime, more modest CBMs are under consideration, such as forming an academic study group to examine reconciliation issues and conducting a joint development project in the South. The last round of talks was in mid-August; the next round is expected no earlier than November, in hopes this would provide sufficient time for forward movement on the stalled issues. Two key members of the Thai team engaged us on how they believe U.S. assistance to civil society in the South could make a positive contribution in building continuencies in support of dialogue, while warning of the need to proceed carefully due to numerous sensitive issues.

2. (S) Comment: The resumption of the secret dialogue over the summer, while welcome, has not been particularly fruitful. On the insurgent side, questions remain about the extent to which its participants in the talks (nearly all exiles) speak with one voice, and can speak for insurgent commanders on the ground. On the government side, the RTG's ability to move the process forward is hamstrung by broad national political dynamics and military commander perspectives on the situation in the South, which conspire to leave Abhisit rather alone in pushing toward a political solution through dialogue, unwilling or unable to use

the power of his office. End Summary and Comment.

PM Pushing, But Dialogue Won't Budge

13. (S) Bangkok PolCounselor touched base with HD Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) representative Michael Vatikiotis September 30 on the margins of a conference on Political and Extremist Islam in Southeast Asia convened by the Open Source Center. Vatikiotis said he had met September 29 with PM Abhisit and Deputy Democrat Party leader/South activist Kraisaak Choonhavan to talk about the recently renewed HDC-brokered talks between the RTG and insurgents in southern Thailand (Reftel). The good news was that Abhisit remained very much on top of developments and committed to pushing a policy of dialogue forward. Unfortunately, Abhisit indicated that RTA Commander Anupong Paochinda was not at all on board with the dialogue approach. Vatikiotis' impression was that Abhisit was rather alone at the top, and either unwilling or unable to use the power of the office of the PM.

14. (S) In an effort to bring the army in as a stakeholder, Vatikiotis reported, Abhisit has asked retired General Kasem, formerly a 4th area (South) army commander and current Anupong advisor, to join the RTG dialogue team led by Payap University's Mark Tamthai, with Kraisaak and NSC staffer Somkiat Boonchu as the other members. A gambit to make a gesture to the insurgents by releasing from prison Muslim spiritual leader Baba Betong has stalled, with Kraisaak indicating that the Justice Minister may be the subject of a scandal to break publicly soon. But the

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biggest stumbling block for moving forward with dialogue was the lack of accountability for the June 8 mosque killings, with the sole subject of an arrest warrant having vanished. Abhisit reportedly confirmed that the RTG believed Royal Aide de Camp General Naphol was protecting "his man," but that there was no higher cover. (Note: Since General Naphol oversees the Queen-sponsored Village Defense Force project in the South, there has been speculation regarding direction of VDF activities. We have heard separately from a palace official associated with the Queen, M.L. Anuporn Kashemsant, that the Queen sent signals to PM Abhisit for the investigation into the mosque attack to proceed/justice be served without regard to the position of those implicated. End Note).

Key CBMs Stalled

15. (S) Tamthai echoed Vatikiotis' concerns in a separate conversation with Chiang Mai CG on October 2. He expressed frustration at the RTG's lack of movement on what he considers to be the two primary confidence-building measures on the table:

-- June 8 mosque attack investigation. The sole subject of an arrest warrant has yet to be found by law enforcement authorities. The suspect, a military informant, was "clearly being hidden and protected" by General Naphol, Tamthai said. He

observed that the RTG's inability to deliver accountability for these killings signaled to the insurgent "movement" that there were certain people who were above the law and could act with impunity in the South. As a result, the movement had little choice but to draw one of two unfortunate conclusions: either the RTG was not serious about its talk of pursuing a political reconciliation with the insurgency; or the RTG was indeed serious but could not deliver.

-- Prisoner release. The possible release of Baba Betong remained mired in legal process and complications (see Reftel). Tamthai said it was hard to cut through all this because the secrecy of the dialogue meant the NSC could not be forthright with the justice bureaucracy about why the release needed to be done. As a result, the judicial officials involved in the matter were dragging their feet.

Lesser CBMs Under Consideration

16. (S) With movement on the key confidence-building measures stalled, Tamthai described two more modest measures that the parties to the talks were pursuing:

-- Academic study group/Track II approach. At the last round of talks on August 14, the parties agreed to name three or so scholars from each "side" to form a group that study the broad, long-term issues involved with reconciliation. The group's findings would be publicized, perhaps via a conference. Tamthai would chair the group and select the "Thai" members, whereas the movement would select its representatives - presumably ethnic Malay Muslim scholars who lived in the South, spoke Thai well, and were free to travel.

-- Joint development project. At the August talks, the sides agreed to shift away from earlier discussions of a pilot cease-fire in Yala province and instead look at formulating a

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large joint development project. Both sides lacked confidence that the Yala cease-fire could succeed, given its large territorial scale and doubts that cease-fire violators could be held accountable by either side. As an alternative, the sides were contemplating a development project in the South that would marry RTG resources with local community involvement - and be backed by a local cease-fire in the locality of the project activity. Both sides' stake in seeing the development project succeed would help ensure the cease-fire was honored. According to Tamthai, the King's Royal Project was ready to engage in the effort, which would help solidify RTG and RTA support for it.

17. (S) Tamthai said the next round of talks would not take place until November at the earliest, in hopes that this would provide sufficient time for movement not only on the study group and development project ideas, but also on the larger issues of the mosque attack investigation and prisoner release.

¶8. (S) Again echoing Vatikiotis' concerns, Tamthai said that relations between PM Abhisit and RTA Commander Anupong on the South issue were "not good." Whereas in previous discussions with CG over the last 18 months Tamthai had spoken favorably of Anupong's open-mindedness toward a non-military solution to the southern insurgency, this time he said Anupong "has changed." In contrast to Anupong's previous comments to Tamthai that he was "just a soldier" and willing to follow the civilian leadership's direction on the political strategy of the southern issue, Tamthai now felt Anupong had become more politicized and willing to take a stand on strategic political issues. Tamthai also asserted that the vast majority of RTA officers in the South were convinced that a military solution was not possible - but none were willing to convey this up the chain of command to Anupong.

Tamthai, NSC's Somkiat on Civil Society Role, U.S. Assistance

¶9. (S) In a break from previous practice of meeting separately in Chiang Mai, Tamthai joined the NSC's Somkiat Boonchu for a September 25 meeting in Bangkok with PolCouns, USAID Regional Director, and USAID Program officer, acknowledging his dual role engaging on southern issues as peace studies professor (openly) and facilitator for "dialogue for all sides" (secretly, under NSC direction). Somkiat and Tamthai convened the meeting to discuss the implications for their southern dialogue efforts of the recent USAID Request for Proposal (RFP) for bids to provide nation-wide assistance to independent organizations and civil society, as well as to support peace-building in the South.

¶10. (S) Somkiat and Tamthai suggested the proposed U.S. assistance program could make a positive contribution by empowering local community leaders in the deep south to become part of the process and solution, by raising their voice/profile in decision-making and sharing responsibility for what happens in their communities. While the ten southern representatives on the 2006 National Reconciliation Commission would be a useful starting point for engagement, a "walk and talk" would be required to reach out and engage the local community elders.

¶11. (S) Somkiat and Tamthai warned, however, that the release of the RFP had created quite a stir, turning elements of civil society against each other as different bidders competed to

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assemble teams, including attempted poaching from existing civil society organizations (CSOs). While the proposal could build a constituency for dialogue, it also potentially cut across some very sensitive issues, such as their secret dialogue. Tamthai explained that the proposal also fell along a fault line of Bangkok-based academics and CSOs versus southern communities, which resented those who parachuted in from Bangkok; southerners feared the USAID proposal could be a vehicle for Bangkok-based actors rather than local empowerment. (Note: We have heard similar fears from two other contacts with extensive networks across the deep south. End Note). Tamthai said he would engage 150 southern civil society representatives at an upcoming seminar in Hat Yai about their possible value-added role in

peace-building activities.
MORROW